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Preamble:

These design principles are guidelines (not strict rules) intended to assist flag designers of any skill level with creating flags that are effective, memorable, widely adopted, and hopefully beloved by the people they represent.

An understanding of these guidelines will enable you to improve on your own designs, identify why elements of some flags do or don't work, and appreciate why a design may still work even if one or more of these guidelines are broken.

Like any field of design, flag-design (known as vexillography as the practice or vexillology for the scholarly study) has a rich, complex, and global history with different aspects and nuances — some which may or may not be applicable to Australian vexillography.

A full account of Australian vexillology is beyond the scope of these guiding principles; so all readers are encouraged to perform their own research on Australian flag history and the international literature on flag design practices and pitfalls.

Finally, any example provided is for illustrative purposes only from a vexillology lens, and is not a broader commentary on the flag's historical context or the meaning it has to the people/places it represents.

There is no perfect 'gold standard'; nor are there 'absolute don'ts'. Every flag has design strengths and weaknesses. Even those flags which break every 'rule' in the book can become more beloved than another design with too strict of an adherence to the guidelines. Use this guide within its educational context — helping you learn from experiences of others in a manner which explains and demonstrates key vexillography principles.

Hopefully you find this a useful and enjoyable read!

These principles are a thoughtful amalgamation of guidance from notable vexillologists, teachings from graphic designers, feedback from the general public, and opinion of this guide's author/compiler.

Creating Great Flags: Guiding Principles For Oz Flag Design

What makes a flag great?

1. Meaningful,
2. Easily recognisable,
3. Thoughtful use of colour,
4. No letting or seals,
5. Intentionally related, and
6. Genuinley distinctive.

\+ Of a timeless characteristic

Bonus flag design exercise included!

J. Hughes

1) Meaningful to those it represents.

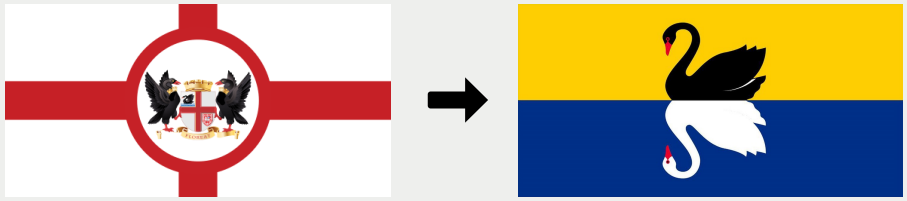
- Draw from symbols or motifs with a strong emotional and historic connection to our nation and its people.
- Pay tribute to both Australian history and represents our future as a nation. This should not be a compromise (i.e. it is not one or the other).
- Seek to adapt existing symbols where possible/practical, rather than discarding or rejecting them without thought.
- Avoid representation that is overly literal and without added meaning.
- Steer clear of problematic symbolism (can be subjective) given that flags should aim to unite rather than divide.
- Account for the strengths and limitations of your chosen representation practice: 'uniquely segmented' vs 'broadly inclusive'.
    - Some flags are uniquely segmented, whereby one or more of the flag's elements (be it a colour, individual symbol, or even a full section of the flag) represents people of a specific heritage, experience, or background.
    - Other flags are broadly inclusive, with all flag elements being concepts which anyone of that place could identify with or feel represented by.
    - The former representation practice can often be interpreted as dividing people —due to the perceived inequality in afforded meaning— irrespective of the designer's original intent; however, a blind adoption of the latter representation practice —in an attempt to avoid this pitfall— is not inherently better given how easy it is to be 'too generic' or samey when attempting to use elements/concepts that can equally represent anyone and everyone.
    - Flags should be intentional with the representation practice used and proactively use their subsequent design choices to account for the strengths and limitations of the chosen practice. For Instance, a flag which is uniquely segmented through use of a canton (reserved as the traditional place of honour on a flag), as done with the futuristic Australian National Flag depicted in Event Horizon (below), will likely be more divisive than a non-canton design which harmoniously arranges its elements.

Futuristic 2047 Australian National Flag as depictred in 1997 film Event Horison.

Example

Flags For Australia's proposed flag for the City of Perth.

- Seeks to adapt existing symbols, including that of the dual swans on Perth's current flag — *"Symbolising the city's shared history and connection to the Swan River / Derbarl Yerrigan."*
- Adds new meaning with its design choices — *"The mirrored swans represent the city's diverse communities united in harmony."*
- Uses symbols with a shared historical connection specific to the people of WA — *"The black swan/maali features in Whadjuk Noongar creation stories and is the bird emblem of WA, adoring both the present city flag and coat of arms. Black and gold are the state colours of Western Australia."*



Current (1949) *Flags For Australia (2024)*

Fin from a Liberator of 25 Squadron

WA Coat of Arms

Perth and WA Souvenir Fridge Magnets

2) Recognisable when dramatically simplified or viewed under various conditions.

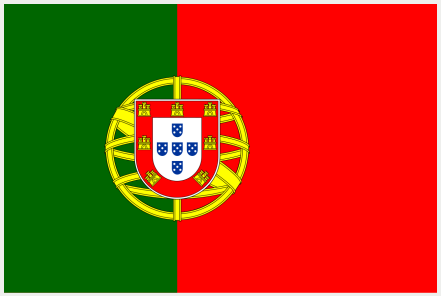
- Design for versatility. The flag must stay recognisable:
  - In different positions (hung, draped or flying),
  - Under varied wind conditions,
  - In greyscale,
  - When viewed from afar,
  - Drawn in a simplified manner (even by any Aussie child),
  - In a digital setting (such as a country icon), or
  - Adapted for any number of other purposes.
- Embrace abstraction to create a highly recognisable design, helping the flag to be more memorable. For instance, symbols which are silhouette or stylised often succeed better than realistic depictions because they are more easily recognised in the above scenarios.
- Avoid using too many symbols. Australia is a vast country with an abundance of uniqueness, so attempting to capture every single aspect or feature of our country is simply not practical.
- Remember that flags have two sides, meaning that certain designs will appear reversed when the flag is in flight which may change the intended look or meaning.
- Flags must, on occasion, be scaled to different ratios. Ensure your design can accommodate common 1:2, 2:3, and 3:5 ratios.

Example

Consider the below flags of Brazil and Portugal. Both contain elements which could be described as complex, but we can still identify each, even in their smallest of forms (such as when displayed at the Olympics or communicated through an emoji), since the viewer is still able to recognise the overall composition across different mediums. In other words, the key elements of each flag's design remain recognisable under a variety of conditions, presentations, or depictions.

Brazil

Portugal



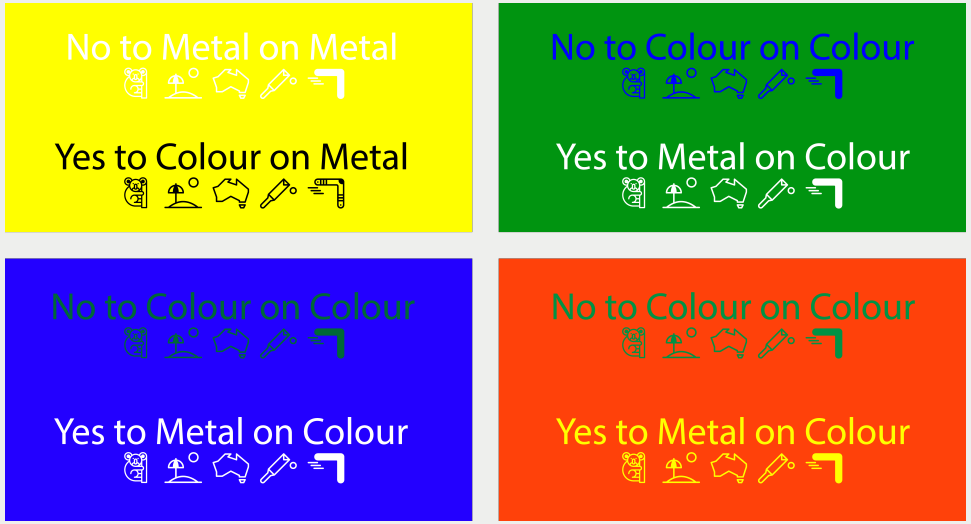
Try identifying each flag in amongst the below images for yourself!

3) Has thoughtful use of colour.

- Make thoughtful use of colour by attributing specific meaning to each colour used (fimbriations are often exempt).
- Guidance from well-regarded vexillographers and designers is to use 2-3 colours which hold symbolic and/or historic significance to the people represented by the flag; so be careful and well-considered if using more than this.
- Consider use of contrast, colour harmony, and the Rule of Tincture in the design.

Example

Look at each of the boxes below. You will quickly see that the top lines/symbols in each box will be harder to read/see, while the bottom lines/symbols will be easier to read/see. This is the Rule of Tincture applied outside its original heraldry context.


No to Metal on Metal
Yes to Colour on Metal
No to Colour on Colour
Yes to Metal on Colour
No to Colour on Colour
Yes to Metal on Colour
No to Colour on Colour
Yes to Metal on Colour

Example continued on next page.

Example continued.

The Rule of Tincture: Metal should not be placed on metal, nor colour on colour.

Argent/white and or/yellow are considered metals (because they traditionally represent silver and gold), while everything else is a colour.

*Sable, or black, is often considered to have properties of both a metal and a colour (working as either) depending on the country, traditional custom, or common usage.

The 'Rule' of Tincture is a useful guide in flag design given it is a simple, yet effective, application of basic colour theory.

Not only is it applicable when metals and colours are placed on one another, but also when those same metals and colours are placed next to each other and are touching.

Consider the below national flags. Which do not adhere to the Rule of Tincture and how much does this impact that flag's overall design?

4) Does not contain letting or seals.

- By western convention, most well-regarded national flags (design wise) traditionally do not use lettering or seals given:
  - Their intended historical use by ships at sea to communicate/represent ones nationality from afar,
  - The limitations of traditional construction methods, and
  - Typography being (almost) always poorly executed and unable to appeal to everyone.
- While the use of flags has significantly changed in the modern era, general advice is for all flags to avoid lettering/seals all together given how easy it is for designs have this become their focal point, key distinguishing feature, or most unique design aspect to the flag's own detriment.
- If you are using a seal or lettering, then ensure it works under each scenario listed in Guideline 2 (as done with Brazil's and South Korea's national flags).
- Design techniques to consider when incorporating a seal, badge, or coat of arms into a flag include:
  - *Streamlining*: Keeping the seal, badge, or coat of arms intact; but simplifying its form.
  - *Extracting*: Using only part of the original imagery.
  - *Remixing*: Combining symbols from the original more complex design in a more suitable manner and/or form.
- Remember, aspiring and experienced vexillographers alike must respect the strengths and limitations of flags as a design medium and should design accordingly with these in mind.

Example

Remixing of the sun and dragonfly from Darwin's Coat of Arms (as depicted on the City of Darwin's current flag) and the city's logo respectively — with retention of the flag's green, gold, and red colours.

Current

Robert Ingpen (1978)

Proposed

Anonymous (2016)

Questions to ask yourself:

- What elements did (or did not) work in both the current flag and proposed flag?
- Should an Australian city flag contain the Southern Cross as depicted on our national, state and territory flags? Or at all? And why or why not?
- How do you feel about the dragonfly tail not being depicted in full? Does this choice alter the meaning of the design?
- Does the proposed flag violate this guide's Bonus Design Principle on Page 15? How is it similar to, or different from, those bonus examples shown?

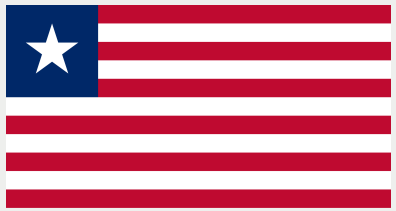
5) Is inentionally related.

- It is not that all flags must always be intentionally related to existing symbols or another flag. Flags can of course be wholly original and stand on their own merit without such connections.
- Rather, this guiding principle advises that: 'If a flag's design is to be connected to other symbols (including other flags), which is often to its advantage, then said connections should be intentional and strong'.
    - This means the flag should, by extension, avoid unintentionally sharing connection with other symbol(s) to the detriment of said flag's original intended use, meaning, or symbolism.
    - Remember: Just because the original creator designed with certain connections in mind, does not mean that others will see those same connections on their own. Great flags resonate with people when they do not rely on, in part or in full, an explanation of such connections.
- Of course using this guiding principle retrospectively to pass judgment on existing flags and their elements is likely ill-suited. One only has to look at the many examples of very similar national flags and their unique historical contexts (the flag history of Chad and Romania for instance) to understand why use of such judgment would be a mistake. However, it would be amiss of any new flag designs to not at least consider this principle with the benefit of 21st century hindsight and the availability of information in our modern digital era.

Example

Linked by a shared history or geography

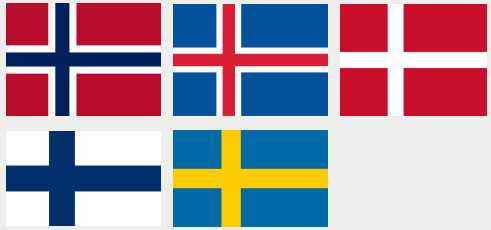
Liberia



Bears a resemblance to the US Flag reflecting the nations founding by free African Americans.

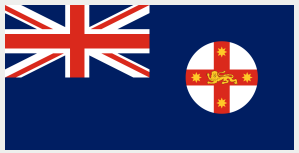
The Scandinavian Cross

Most will recognise these are Nordic countries (even if they cannot match the exact country to its flag) demonstrating the effectiveness of having an intentional, recognisable, and consistent theme.

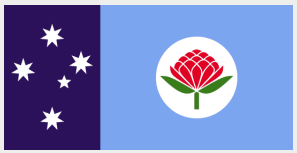


New South Wales

Current (1876)



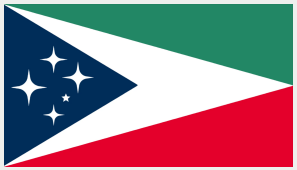
Brendan Jones (2001)



Many redesigns for Australian state flags propose alignment to our current internal territory flags through use of the same ratio split (1:2) of the flag's fields.

ACT (left) and NT (right) current territory flags

Failing to account for other symbols or flags



Anonymous (2022)

An example of a proposed Australian National Flag (left) that, despite being well explained, showcases how the design elements themselves must have an intention that is clear to the everyday Australian; else they risk being more associated to symbols that are simply a closer match design-wise.

Do you see an 'Australian' Southern Cross and indigenous boomerang stylised in a chevron pattern? Or do you see other symbols instead? Here are two examples of what others first saw or thought of:

"Australian Guyana"

National Flag of Guyana

"Australia: Subaru Edition"

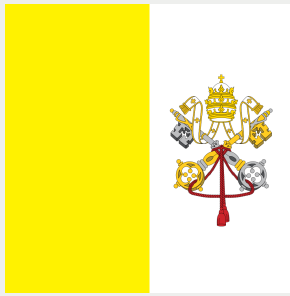
Subaru Badge/Logo

6) Is genuinley distinctive.

- Strive for genuine uniqueness through originality derived from a truly new lens or viewpoint.
- Avoid blindly following trends, but also do not be different just for the sake of it. Instead be well considered.
- Avoid design by committee. Such practices often lead to either banality or a lack of unified vision, both restricting the flag's distinctiveness.
- For every memorable design which follows all the 'rules', there is another which does not follow every rule to the letter (see the examples).
- Finally, remember that distinctiveness cannot be prescribed. No one can provide a formula for originality because, if they did, then all designs would become samey with everyone attempting to be 'original' in the same way.

Example

Vatican City



Metal-on-Metal / Or-on-Argent

South Africa

More than 2-3 colours

Nepal

'Non-traditional' shape
(in a western vexillography context)

Bonus design principle:
Ensures a timeless feel/characteristic.

- Great flags are timeless —their designs lasting decades or centuries— so aim to become and stay a classic.
- Flags either become a classic with time or (if new) must convey such timeliness through their design choices.
- Common criticisms of many new flags proposed in 21st century is that their designs do not 'look flag-like', but rather are closer to:
  - A corporate logo/branding,
  - Country/regional souvenir,
  - Modern art piece, or
  - Website graphic.
- There are many reasons for this (see the examples), but fundamentally such criticism stems from violating this timelessness principle.
- Guidance for Australian vexillography is to avoid designs that are intentionally trendy, flashy, ephemeral, or closely tied (design wise) to existing works in those aforementioned categories (i.e. existing logos, art, souvenirs, branding, or web-graphics).

Example

Proposed New Zealand flag that was criticised for simply repurposing the Tourism New Zealand logo.

Alofi Kanter (2015)

Tourism New Zealand Logo

Proposed New Zealand flag that was criticised for evoking the feel of corporate branding and graphics.

Kyle Lockwood (2015)

Kiwi Party Plates

Australian flag designers must also be vigilant of such criticism, learning from the New Zealand Flag Referendum, by either proactively defending their design choices in a manner which changes public sentiment or ensuring their designs avoids these parallels to begin with.

For instance, Australian National Flag designs featuring a kangaroo spanning across the flag (edge-to-edge) are all too often compared with existing corporate branding (Quantas being commonly cited).

Tone Moore (2010)

Quantas Logo

Putting Theroy Into Practice

Try your hand at redesigning the City of Sydney flag below!

Remember to research the history of the original flag and Sydney itself, as you will need to be able to explain your rationale behind the design choices that you have made.

Current (1908)

Your Redesign ( )

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